

Article Last Updated: 8/21/2006 08:39 PM

Outside sources help Utah schools fight squeeze on physical education

Keeping kids fit

By Ronnie Lynn
The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

By the time Jared Laster sprang from spot to spot like a grasshopper, he was dripping with perspiration and gasping for air. The South Jordan first-grader had already soared like an eagle, slithered like a snake and loped like an elephant during his weekly 40-minute physical education class at Daybreak Elementary, and he was beat.

"I'm thirsty," he huffed as he and his classmates cooled down on the gym floor.

Like most Utah elementary schools, Laster's offers less time in formal P.E. than the 90 minutes a week recommended by the state Board of Education. Tight budgets and pressure to improve students' reading and math have put the squeeze on P.E., leaving it up to principals and classroom teachers to make time for it.

Some do. Some don't.

But a growing number of elementary schools are turning to outside sources for help in integrating more physical activity into the school day.

Nearly half of Utah's 500 elementary schools have joined the state Department of Health's Gold Medal School program, which requires students and school staff to heed several standards for physical activity and nutrition.

Last year, a handful of schools participated in a Regence Blue Cross Blue Shield's "Move It" program. The program equipped fifth-graders with pedometers and challenged them to walk more steps than competing classes.

Some even vie for The Presidential Physical Fitness Award, which recognizes schools whose students score in the top 15 percent nationally on fitness indicators such as curl-ups, push-ups and an endurance run.

Daybreak participates in the presidential award program because it encourages students to make physical activity part of their everyday lives.

"It's supposed to make fitness something you work on throughout the year, not just the month before the test," Principal Doree Strauss said. "It promotes regular fitness for the kids."

Three out of five school-aged children don't exercise regularly, according to the 2006 Kids Count data book, a nationwide database of statistics on children's health, education, poverty and other factors compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

More than one in three high-school kids don't get regular physical activity, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That's one of the reasons the Utah Department of Health launched the Gold Medal School program in 2001.

The program offers a framework for schools to emphasize physical activity and nutrition among students and staff alike. Schools can earn one of five achievement levels - and \$200 to \$1,500 in corresponding awards - depending on how ambitious they are in meeting health department criteria.

For example, to earn a Gold Medal Award, schools must require all physical education classes to be overseen by a certified P.E. teacher, prohibit teachers from using food as a reward or punishment for students and encourage healthy food choices and physical activity.

While many principals, teachers, and even parents, initiate their schools' participation in the program, those at other schools

balk at some of the requirements.

Two, in particular, are deal-breakers, said Sarah Rigby, the health department's Gold Medal School coordinator. First is the program's No. 1 criteria: requiring 90 minutes of structured physical activity a week. Second is the no-food-as-a-reward-or-punishment requirement.

"It's part of the culture," Rigby said. "It's cheaper and you don't have to think as much about other rewards when you can go to Costco and get a bag of Tootsie Rolls for two bucks."

Daybreak Elementary signed up for the Gold Medal program this year, but Principal Strauss hasn't yet determined the goals her students and staff should tackle.

They're already on their way, though, by starting the day with 10 minutes or so of physical activity - at Strauss' direction - and capitalizing on the state-of-the-art fitness equipment in the adjoining community center. Teachers use the weightroom, while fifth- and sixth-grade students get to do spin classes on the stationary bikes.

"I want them to be very active daily," Strauss said. "You can't keep them in a seat for eight hours and expect them to do well in academics."

Contact Ronnie Lynn at rlynn@sltrib.com or at 801-257-8722. Send comments to livingeditor@sltrib.com.

What's to come:

Sunday: Cafeteria Food

The state of meal offerings, exercise and nutrition education and what some parents and advocates are doing to improve the situation.

Monday: Parent Toolbox

Tips to help parents shape their children's eating and exercise habits.

Tuesday: Health & P.E.

A look at health and physical education in schools and the effects of the Gold Medal nutrition and exercise program.

Wednesday: Student Nutrition

What kids really think about school lunch cafeterias and nutritious recipes for home or school.